George Campbell, â??Lunardiâ??s Balloon, An Elegyâ?•

Description

GEORGE CAMPBELL

â??Lunardiâ??s Balloon, An Elegyâ?•

Low sunk the sun, departing from the day,
His latest beams had tingâ??d the western clouds,
Evâ??ning advanced, clad in sober grey,
And Night fast followâ??d with her dusky shrouds.

Tirâ??d with its hurry and its bustling noise,
I left the town, and, wandâ??ring throâ?? the fields,
I taste the silent Evâ??ningâ??s sober joys,
And all the pleasures which retirement yields.

The mournful Echoes raisâ??d their loudest voice,
And answerâ??d plaintive to the loverâ??s sigh:
Prophet of ills, the Owl, with horrid noise,
Screamâ??d at a distance in the gloomy sky.

The post-horn, sounding, echoes throâ?? the air
At intervals I hear the horseâ??s tread:
His near approach, the growing sounds declare;
Far off I see him throâ?? the dubious shade.

The rising Moon shot forth a glimmâ??ring ray,
And gave the nightly rider to the view;
Pensive and sad he passâ??d along the way,
And all his horn was hung with sable hue.

Stop! stop! I criâ??d, and tell thy cause of wo,
Thou neâ??er wast wont to shed the briny tear!
What now can make the copious torrents flow!
What sad, what mournful tidings dost thou bear?

Is HASTINGS now from accusation freed?
Will we no more hear of his barbâ??rous rage?
Or PIT and FOX for ever now agreed?
Will their debates no longer fill the page?

Have Prussian wits exhausted all the store
Of anecdotes about their favâ??rite king?

Or, are the Dutch divisions now no more?
Will Birth-days not their annual tributes bring?

No, these, he said, are not the cause of grief;
â??Tis not for these I make such heavy moan:
O, what shall soothe my pain or bring relief?
LUNARDIâ??S famâ??d BALLOON, alas! is gone!

I heard him speak, and struck with sad surprise,
Declare, I said, how the mishap befel:
Afresh the torrents bursting from his eyes,
He, with a sigh, began the mournful tale!

â??Twas where the TYNE rolls down in all his pride,
His limpid waters by NEWCASTLE flow,
Whose stately Turrets rise upon its side,
The famâ??d BALLOON receivâ??d a fatal blow!

â??Twas there the great LUNARDI, famâ??d afar
For airy journeys in the middle sky,
Perparâ??d again to mount the floating Car,
And throâ?? the clouds in upper regions fly.

The day approachâ??d, what multitudes attend!
They crowd the mountains and they fill the plain,
In hopes to see the wondrous man ascend;
But ah! they look, they wish, they hope in vain!

And now the great BALLOON began to fill;
Her buoyant sides rose bellowing in the air:
Thâ?? intrepid hero usâ??d his utmost skill;
His hopes were raisâ??d on high and great his care.

Ah! silly mortals! what small hope of joy
Elates our heart, and swells our little mind!
How can a moment this fond hope destroy,
And leave a real, lasting grief behind?

We truly thought he would have gone so far
As Earthâ??s attractions had not brought him down;
There got intelligence from evâ??ry star,
And been our correspondent in the moon:

For now She, rising, floats about the ground,
The cords are loosâ??d and all preparâ??d for flight:
The Crowds, at awful distance, stand around,
And view the scene with wonder and delight.

But ah! what numbers can describe the shock!
Or how can language paint the sad surprise,
When from the vitriol sudden fire brake,
And the blue flame met the beholders eyes!

Water! they criâ??d; but water there was none;
She, like an arrow, mounts, and cleaves the air:
LUNARDI saw his famâ??d BALLOON was gone;
Wild were his looks and frantic with despair!

Sure! sure! he criâ??d, the elements are joinâ??d
In close concert, to work my overthrow!
I float in water, and Iâ??m tossâ??d with wind:
But the flame has struck the last, the fatal blow!

O fire! how fatal to BALLOON exploits!
Tytler may tell, LUNARDI too has known,
Who bravâ??d the greatest dangers in his flight;
But now his hopes of future gloryâ??s gone.

He saw her rise, but could not bring her back;
He saw her burst, ah! never to return!
The very heavâ??ns were mantlâ??d oâ??er with black,
And Nature seemâ??d the mighty loss to mourn!

NEWCASTLE raisâ??d her voice in loud lament;
When Kelso heard, she echoâ??d back the strain;
Edina joinâ??d in the same sad complaint;
And Glasgow mournâ??d, but mournâ??d, alas! in vain!

When thus he said, he spurrâ??d his weary steed,
Adieu! adieu! I must no longer stay!
Then took the road, and with redoubled speed,
Leaving me sad, he passâ??d along the way.

NOTES:

Title *Lunardi* Vincenzo (Vincent) Lunardi (1754-1806), Italian diplomat and celebrated balloon aeronaut, active in Britain 1784-1787.

9 *Echoes* The repetition of sound personified here by reference to the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus found in Ovidâ??s *Metamorphoses* (Book III, ll. 339-358).

13 *post-horn* A valveless brass horn used by a post rider, messenger, or the guard of a mail coach â??to announce arrivalâ?• (*OED*).

20 *horn* A reference to the riderâ??s head.

25 *HASTINGS* Warren Hastings (1732-1818), English statesman, served as Governor General of India from 1773-1784. Facing increased scrutiny of his policies and conduct, and lack of political support at home, Hastings

resigned his position and returned to England in June 1785. He was arrested in May 1787 and charges against him were read in Parliament; these included his role in the judicial execution of Maharaja Nandakumar in 1775, and his martial efforts to control British interests in the territories of Bengal and Mysore (*ODNB*).

27 *PIT and FOX* William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806), Tory politician and statesman, served as Prime Minister of England from 1783-1801, and Charles James Fox (1749-1806), Whig politician and statesman, were arch political rivals. Their frequent clashes in Parliament were a news staple of this period.

29-30 *Prussian witsâ?¦their favâ??rite king* A reference to the outpouring of praise and panegyric for Frederick the Great (1712-1786, King of Prussia from 1740) following his death on August 17, 1786.

31 *Dutch divisions* A reference to the Patriot Revolt that caused a period of political instability in the Netherlands from 1780-1787.

41 *TYNE* A major river in northeast England that divides the city of Newcastle from Gateshead.

43 *stately Turrets* Probably a reference to the battlements of the Castle Keep, a medieval fortification on the River Tyne in Newcastle.

49 *what multitudes attend* Contemporary accounts often mention the huge crowds drawn to Lunardiâ??s balloon launches.

67 *awful* â??Profoundly respectful or reverentialâ?• (*OED*).

69 *numbers* Poetry.

71 *vitriol* Sulfuric acid.

79 *I float in water* Lunardiâ??s flight from Edinburgh on December 20, 1785 ended with a forced landing in the North Sea, where he was lucky to be rescued by a passing fishing boat (Lunardi, *An Account of Five Aerial Voyages in Scotland* [London, 1786], p. 101).

82 *Tytler* James Tytler (1745-1804), a Scottish chemist and aeronaut, became the first person in Great Britain to ascend in a balloon on August 25, 1784, preceding Lunardiâ??s first flight in England by several weeks.

85-86 *He saw her riseâ?¦never to return!* Lunardiâ??s attempted ascent from Newcastle on September 19, 1786 went horribly wrong. Campbellâ??s description of the balloonâ??s loss matches the most detailed contemporary account published in *The Yorkshire Magazine* (vol. I, September 1786, pp. 287-88). Curiously, however, Campbell chooses not to mention that one of the local men assisting Lunardi that day, â??Mr. Ralph Heron,â?• became tangled in the ropes and was swept several hundred feet in the air. He fell and subsequently died of his injuries. It was this tragic accident (rather than the loss of his balloon) that effectively ended Lunardiâ??s career as an aeronaut in Britain.

87 *heavâ??ns were mantlâ??d oâ??er with black* The hydrogen gas produced by the chemical reaction between sulfuric acid and iron shavings was dark in color and, when released from the balloon due to tearing or accident, would create a black cloud.

90 *Kelso* A market town in Scotland near the English border. Lunardi made a successful ascent from Kelso on October 22, 1785 (*Kayâ??s Edinburgh Portraits*, vol. I, ed. Maidment [London and Glasgow, 1885], p. 65).

91 *Edina* Edinburgh. Lunardi made a total of three ascents from Edinburgh on October 5, 1785, December 20, 1785, and July 31, 1786.

92 *Glasgow* Lunardi made two ascents from Glasgow on November 23 and December 5, 1785.

Source: *Poems on Several Occasions* (Kilmarnock, 1787), pp. 114-118. [ECCO]

Edited by Bill Christmas